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THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN
FROM THREE TO SEVEN YEARS OF AGE.*

BY MARY LOUCH,

Training Department, Cheltenham Ladies' College.

I PROPOSE to open the discussion on this subject by drawing attention to the special characteristics of young children, thus showing the wants that need to be supplied. I shall then attempt to infer from these wants guiding principles as to the best method and place of education.

There are, broadly speaking, four questions to answer:—What? Where? When? How?

What shall little children be occupied with? I purposely do not say, "What shall a little child be taught?" lest I should be misunderstood, because the word "teaching," as often used implies something imposed on the mind from without, for this I prefer to use the word *instruction*. By *teaching* I understand a mixture of instruction and developing of power, as when one causes a child to form a general idea of steam, the process is a combination of suggestion, direction of his observation, a drawing out of his thoughts on that and allied subjects until he has some idea of evaporation which has not been directly communicated to him by the teacher. By *education* I understand something wider still, including all that concerns the unfolding of a child's nature, physical, mental, and spiritual. Part of this is done by Nature, society, and circumstances generally, part by the parents and professional teachers. The parents remain the persons chiefly responsible; it is they who give the first bias, who make the child's environment, who determine the food on which its body, mind, and soul shall be nourished, who have the special insight depending on instinctive sympathy; the best teacher ever born cannot be to a child all that good and true parents can be, and no child, I believe, can be fully

* A paper read before the British Child-Study Association.

educated in affection and morality as well as in intellect who has not a good home. The child, like the plant, has its roots, and these roots strike deep. A wise man was once asked, "At what age shall I begin to educate my child?" "Ten years before he is born," he replied. So we realise that parents are *nolens volens* the first and chief educators of children, and home is the first schoolroom. Whether any part of the parents' work can be assisted or supplemented by others, or whether the home would not be better for a little extension, is a matter we shall have to discuss presently.

I return, then, to my first question:—With what shall the child be occupied, or what shall it be taught in these early years? At three the child is not *beginning* to learn, it *has* learnt an enormous amount, more than it will ever learn in any subsequent three years of its life. I must not now enumerate, it would take too long, all that it has learnt. Just contrast the new-born child opening its eyes to find itself surrounded by a coloured veil, not knowing, indeed, that its eyes are open, nor that there is an outside world at all, unable to distinguish the mixed up mass of vague sensations of touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell, not even knowing that it exists or has a body, not able to put its hand to its mouth, not even knowing that it has a hand or a mouth; contrast this little creature with the child of three, who by frequent and almost unaided experiment has made out so much of life that it is able to co-ordinate its muscles so as to walk, run, jump, and dance (in its way), who has learnt that that which at first appeared to it a coloured veil is a surrounding of solid objects all more or less distantly removed from its own body, of the existence of which it now has distinct evidence; it knows, but without being able to name their varieties, what form and colour mean; it knows something of size and solidity, it can pick out those people it knows from a number of others, it has experienced many feelings, knows some of the things which it is well to avoid, and (wonder of wonders) it has not only learnt a language so as to make its wants understood, and to interpret a good deal of what other people talk about, but it has learnt what language *is*, it has discriminated and remembered, with astounding quickness, certain sounds which recurred often, found out with what objects or actions

to connect these sounds, guessed at the meaning of some abstract terms in a way which we should find very difficult even with our mature intellect. To form some idea of the difficulty, imagine yourselves in a country where a complicated language is spoken, of which you have never before heard *one* syllable, not even a similar sound, imagine that you can get no help from grammar or written symbol, that all these sounds are applied to objects, actions, and ideas of which you previously had not the slightest conception, and I imagine in your confused despair you would acknowledge that such a piece of work is no suitable task for an infant in arms. And even now you have not considered all the difficulties of an infant; *you* have learnt to discriminate vocal sounds from those of natural objects, *he* has not; *you* have learnt to make and control vocal utterances, *he* has not; *you* have learnt the need of utterance, *he* has few thoughts to express; you apparently start with everything in your favour. And yet look at the baby, who appears to you little more than an animated pink ball, and see how calmly the wee mite is cooing over his difficulties, taking them, aye, and mastering them too, with the serenity of a philosopher. Why, the powers of that babe in respect of language are gigantic, its progress extraordinary, its achievements astonishing!

The more we think about it the more we see the child's mind is by no means a *tabula rasa* when it appears on its third birthday at the Kindergarten door. Yet there is a vast deal still to be learnt.

There are two ways of determining what we shall teach it. You may consider what is most important, what knowledge or arts are fundamental to a subject, what is most difficult to attain, and what therefore needs longest practice; people who think in this way say, for example, "a straight line is necessary to all drawing, and is the most difficult thing to draw, therefore children should be taught first of all to draw a straight line"; or they say that because a child will not thoroughly understand English or French till he knows Latin, therefore he should begin Latin grammar as soon as he is able to study language at all; or, if speaking of geometry, they would say, as a correct use of language is necessary to geometry, children should first learn their

definitions; and so on with other subjects. These people advocate the logical sequence of study; but, if they really believe what they say, they are generally found to know more about the subject to be learnt than the children to be taught. There are others who say it is true that these things are very important and will have to be mastered some day, but it seems to me that the children are more important than the subject they are to learn. We must take a child as he is, and get him to use the power he has, and we shall only waste time by attributing to him powers which he has not; *a child is not an ignorant man or woman, he is a child* and has powers of his own, instincts, tendencies which he loses in adult life; he will have powers some day that he has now in the germ only, in short, as his body differs in appearance and function from that of a man, so does his mind. We will not, therefore, worry him to draw straight lines to begin with, we will start with what he *can* do; from his scribble we will lead him to artistic representation; from a spoken language, English and French, we will lead him to a written language, *e.g.*, Latin; from words we will lead him to organization of words, *i.e.*, grammar; from empirical observation of form we will lead him to reason about those forms, and we will ask him for definitions only when necessary to a clear understanding of the forms we reason about. Those who argue in this way are said to follow the psychological order of study; they consider the possibilities of the child, not the necessities of the school subject. On this latter principle I would determine the curriculum of the infant school.

Let us *watch* children and see what they are led to do by Nature, and help their efforts; like wise physicians let us assist nature instead of violating it; let us be content for the children to progress step by step, and let us help them to develop themselves by making the universe what it should be, by giving them the opportunities they need; let us live with them, encouraging them to overcome natural difficulties, but not placing artificial ones in their way. To learn *from* children is an art acquired from experience and helped by love. Most of us have to begin with unhearing ears and unseeing eyes in this matter; we often notice what is amusing because unchild-like, while we do not notice what

is child-like, and what should be our guide in bringing up children. I was once watching a little boy, aged about five, who had come to school for the first time that morning; a slate was given to him, and his teacher told him he was to make some straight lines such as she had set for a copy, preparatory to learning to write. However, no strokes appeared. He held his pencil with thumb and forefinger at the extreme end, the unpointed end, and made some erratic marks like a thread of cotton with loops in it, at the bottom of his slate. I turned his attention to the strokes by taking his hand and helping him to form them, but no sooner had I set his hand free, and said in my most engaging tone, "Now try to make one by yourself," than he returned to his drawing of tangled thread with a determined "No, I am drawing a tiger." As I was only an onlooker I left that child to his teacher and his fate; he had taught me a lesson; it was natural to him to draw before writing, he saw some reason for drawing, none for writing; he would have gained the much-needed control of his muscles by drawing, before entering on the complicated difficulties of writing.

Then as to the sequence of reading and writing. In old days reading was always taught first, I believe; now they are taught simultaneously, but I am not sure that even in this we are right. Who was the first to read anything? The man who *wrote* it. And what did he read? Pictures which he had drawn. These his descendants shortened into symbols. We know that the child rapidly rehearses in his development, before and after birth, the history of the race, and observation of racial development would suggest that drawing, writing, reading, is the right order, not reading, writing, drawing.

One hears a good deal about the "drudgery" of beginnings. It seems unreasonable that we should expect to arouse a taste for what we like to call the "belles lettres," or "the fine arts," by an apprenticeship of drudgery. I contend that there need be no drudgery at all if education be rightly directed; effort there should be, but effort is pleasurable; no one cares even to play a game in which there is no effort. A school should be a place of delightful effort, which leads to something; the child has by nature a longing to get on, to progress, to do and to know. I believe this to be

innate, to belong to human nature; but the child sometimes shows no appetite because he is wearied with the offer of the food he does not want, he has learnt by experience that grown-up people ask him to make efforts that end in disappointments and nothingness, that he does his task to-day only to settle down to the same task for days and days in succession, and who can wonder if he resists?

We have said we are to take the child as he is and help him to develop and use the powers he has, and our curriculum is to be determined by those powers. What are the characteristics of children of from three to seven years of age? We shall all agree that they are *restless*, never still for one moment unless they are asleep. Nature has made the child restless for a purpose, a child who is not continually "on the go" is not healthy either physically or mentally. Nature educates it through activity, develops its consciousness of itself and its environment through continual contact with the external. The child's bodily health is maintained by incessant exercise; the surface of a child's body is greater in proportion to its bulk than that of an adult, it therefore gives out more heat in proportion to its size than does an adult. Be thankful if your child is restless, the child who is mentally deficient is often only too restful, and do not let us confuse quietness with goodness, or naughtiness with fidgets. There is of course a purposeless jerkiness which is a sign of ill-health and requires medical treatment. This restlessness is very trying to grown-up people, and for their own protection they try to suppress it; this is one reason, I think, why it is undesirable for a mother to have her children always with her all day long; the poor man's wife, who has no nurse nor governess, sweeps her children out of doors periodically; the rich man's wife needs too to sweep them into the nursery or kindergarten for a few hours at least.

We have probably little idea of the pain it gives a child to sit quietly. A mother had her little boy of three years old playing near her one day while she was writing. She suddenly became aware of the absence of the usual patter, clatter and murmur, and looking round, she saw the little boy with a most unhappy expression on his face sitting on a chair. "What are you doing?" she said. "I'm busy sitting still," he replied, and judging from his face the process required

a maximum of effort. So the infant school should I think be a place where constant activity is permitted, where lessons are very short, and where limbs and sense organs are allowed all possible freedom. This activity is not opposed to concentration of attention, for concentration is activity centred in one object of attention.

(2) The child's interests are connected with external things; through them it gets to know its own power, through them its mental content is accumulated. The child wants, and rightly wants, to see, smell, handle and taste everything. It learns to know the object thus tested by touch (the tongue and lips being more sensitive than the fingers), taste and smell; "the mouth," a great psychologist has said, "is the child's psychic centre." A child at a later stage does not put objects into its mouth, probably fearing the many disagreeable tastes it has thus experienced, and also because its hand and finger-tips have become more educated. I have frequently noticed when watching children who are having lessons on objects which are submitted to them for observation, that the more generally intelligent children test the object with all their senses more thoroughly than those who are less bright; the former grasp it (generally with both hands), turn it over, take a good long smell at it, shake it, do all kinds of things with it, while the duller child looks at it and passes it on without comment, and with hardly a kindling of the eye. The educator's part here is to ensure observation by all the senses of what is likely to pass unnoticed, and expression in suitable language, or by drawing of the observation made; expression in language is desirable, so that words and ideas may be rightly joined together. The place of education should therefore be a place, whether within or out of doors, which provides opportunities for the use of the sense organs by work and play, drill, singing, and object lessons.

(3) The child is imitative. To this is largely due his power to progress, to improve on what he, as a little human animal, would do unaided. In speech, thought, manners, conduct, his mimicry is evident, and yet, through all, his own individuality is apparent. He selects from his environment what he will imitate, and rehearses this in what we call play, but what is to the child a serious expression

of his thoughts. As Wordsworth says in his famous ode, the child gradually forgets the heaven from which he has come, adapts himself by imitation to the world he has entered, representing on a Liliputian scale in his nursery, the whole drama of life. We know from our own experience how much of life is rehearsed in an hour or two in the children's world.

A short time since I was standing at a window which overlooked the back yard belonging to the owner of a small miscellaneous shop. The yard measured at most some fifteen feet square. In it were playing three girls aged presumably about twelve, ten and nine years. The yard had been idealised into a theatre, an old shawl on a clothes' line represented the curtain before the stage, the eldest and youngest of the children made the audience, while the ten-year-old girl performed. Her hair was "put up," i.e., twisted into an untidy knot at the back, and her pinafore was turned hind-side before so that the loose edges made a sort of robe in front. The child when I first saw her was in the midst of a tragic scene lamenting, in loud and sustained tones and with the gestures in vogue in tragedy, the loss of her child. One of the audience was then summoned to the stage to represent a cruel husband, the apparent author of all this woe, for as soon as he appeared our actress rushed to him with the tensest of expressions and attitudes, wringing her hands and crying, "Give me back my child or I will not be your wife any more." When this play was concluded a comic song took its place and the young mistress of tragedy came on with all the smirks and coyness of a third-rate music-hall singer, squaring her arms and shoulders and jerking her head and body in exact imitation of a low professional. This was followed by a sentimental song accompanied by entirely different gestures, which ended in the apparently orthodox manner with a high and prolonged scream. Once or twice interruptions from a Philistine "grown-up" seemed imminent, and at each alarm our actress ran into the audience, and, cowering down, tried to hide herself from view. One could not but feel sorry that so much power should be wasted on so low a theme.

The Story of a Sand-pile, by Dr. Stanley Hall, tells how certain children worked out on a heap of sand all the civic and industrial life they saw around them. We could all

instance many cases showing that dramatic imitation is exuberant in childhood.

So the Kindergarten gives opportunities of representation in games of the thoughts of children; in these games teachers and all join, and the educator helps by causing the children to bring into them all the intelligence of which they are capable, and as here the children reveal the imaginings of their hearts without reserve, the teacher is able to see where the imagination is defective and misguided. She is able too to lead the children's thoughts from the tragedies they rehearse, if left to themselves in the nursery, to healthier themes. While the children are in the imitative stage we playfully call them "mocking-birds," "parrots" or "echoes," and other names which show their special capacity for reproducing the language of others, therefore I cannot but think that this tendency should be used to facilitate future study of language. The child learns the vocabulary of two or three languages as easily as one, he is able to pronounce any sound in a foreign language as easily as his own, so I should advise the learning of a foreign modern language at this period. There is no reason why a child of seven or eight should not read and speak French as well as English, he would then learn with little effort what would cost him much effort later on.

(4) Children are not only imitative they are creative, and on the bent given to their creativeness depends much of the value of what they will originate or produce in later life. "Let me make something," is the natural cry of the intelligent active child. Looking back in life, I see a little five or six-year-old girl, racing wildly into the garden after afternoon school, groaning under the burden of pent-up energy which could not find an outlet quickly enough. "Let's make a new language," she says, and a minute after, "Let's build a house!" Both impossible undertakings, but the natural outcome of spending an hour or so stitching the ugly squares of a patchwork quilt made of remnants of unsaleable cotton material. No wonder creative energy was exuberant, for that hour was always spent in four monotonous occupations:—sewing two or three inches unsatisfactorily, unpicking the same, hunting for a lost needle in the cracks of the uncarpeted part of the schoolroom floor, and (what was most interesting of all),

pricking one's finger and counting the number of bright spots which could be made by judicious squeezing of that one prick on a small and grimy handkerchief. The teacher can suggest to children what they can make, help them to work out their own ideas, give material, guide energy and effort, and set a higher standard of excellence before them.

(5) Children are mentally hungry; they ask or ought to ask questions all day long, and it wears one person out to answer them all, therefore it is good that children should have relays of answerers, that is a change of companions. To know what a child means by his questions requires experience, to answer them requires a large store of information and imagination. A little boy, who was in this questioning stage of existence, one day proved wearisome even to his devoted grandmother, who at last exclaimed somewhat impatiently, "I shall send your questions to the newspaper, and say, 'Master Why-and-Because wants to know all this.'" "Well, Grannie, so you may, if you will sign yourself 'Mrs. I-don't-know.'" Not only have questions to be answered, but the demand for stories is very great. Through stories a child is introduced to romance, to history, to humanity at large; his imagination, his sympathies, and moral judgments are exercised. They form a most important factor in education, and they cannot be too good nor too well told. A wise choice in selection is needed; fancy, fact, and truth all need to be furnished by children's stories. To meet this demand, father, mother, and teacher all need to be pressed into the service; but story-telling is an art that needs cultivation.

Lastly, a child is very impressible. By this I mean that its nervous system is very plastic or malleable, and the mind is correspondingly capable of modification. On the nature and number of these changes habits depend. The time *par excellence* for forming habits is early youth. This is a well-known truth which is emphasised in the proverbs of all races. "Bring up a child," etc., said the Hebrew; "as the twig is bent," etc., said others, and the Jesuit—"Give me the child till he is seven and he will be a Jesuit all his life"; and the American says, "If you can catch a Scotchman young enough you may make something of him." In the home certain habits are formed which cannot be so

well formed anywhere else; and we may also say of the school that it is easier to form certain habits there than at home. We all know what habits we would like our children to form, I will only now mention one, which I think is not sufficiently considered, that is the habit of happiness. The happy person is so much healthier in body and mind, yes, holier than the unhappy person. So much stronger, more influential, more inspiring, more naturally heroic, than the gloomy, pessimistic individual. The value of happiness is as great in its effect on intellect as on the moral character; all other things being equal the happy person is abler intellectually as well as morally.

The question *where* all this shall be done is not yet answered. If the home could provide all that I have suggested as desirable, the home would doubtless be the natural place for the child to live and grow in; if it were a question of home exclusively or school exclusively, I should decide in favour of the home. My opinion is that it is well to supplement the home by the school for about three hours a day. If children were not at school they would probably *not* be with their parents, but with a nurse, and there is no reason to suppose that the nurse is a better companion than the teacher. The mother has often had very little experience of children till her own come, and with the first at least the bringing up is largely experimental. The teacher (of two years' standing at any rate), has generally had considerable experience of children at some particular age. The teacher has made a special study of those things that the child wants to know, and has practised over and over again those things which a child wants to do. The mother is not only a mother, she is a wife, and mistress of a household, a member of a certain circle in society, sometimes she holds public office of some kind, and with all these conflicting duties she neither *can* nor *will* "mother" the children all day long. Moreover, when mothers teach their children (and especially if they do not teach quite as well as they might), friction, which is best avoided, is apt to arise between parent and child. Still, while help is given by the teacher in the education of a child it is important that father and mother shall remain the chief authority, the most respected and best-loved

people in the world; a child's mother is his religion; and "heaven's skies are Mother's eyes"

To have the child in the field in the sunshine learning directly from good old Mother Nature is ideal, but I doubt whether most children if not in the Kindergarten could be in the fields, and every morning is not sunshiny, and nurse is not always wise, nor patient nor good-tempered (neither, you will say, is the teacher, but school hours are short and patience will generally hold out for three hours); and the grass is often too wet to be rolled in, and children cannot walk for hours together, and so it is not possible under ordinary circumstances for a child's life to be one long pastoral. I say, then, let us do the second best and make the school for little children almost as open-air, and as healthy and happy as that kept by Dame Nature herself.